



Webinar

Voices from Tigray

Brutalities against Religious Leaders,
Holy Places and Heritage in Tigray

Testimony 3

Testimony from Debre Damo

8 June 2021

EEPA

Testimony from Debre Damo Monastery

It was on January 11, 2021, Shabiya (Eritrean soldiers) shelled Debre Damo monastery. They were firing heavy artilleries from Sero, Bazet and an intersection road which goes to Feresmay town.

The upper part of the monastery was hit by more than 18 heavy artilleries and in total 28 artilleries landed at the monastery. The shelling lasted for a whole day from 7:00am in the morning till 4pm in the afternoon. Besides, more than 100 heavy artilleries have also landed at the foot of the monastery but was without any casualties. During the shelling, all monks were on a prayers program inside the church. Normally from 09 January 2021 till 15 January 2021, monks do prayers.

There was no damage and nothing happened to the Abuna Aregawi Church but 26 shelter houses of monks were completely destroyed and burnt. Metal sheets and wood parts of the houses were burnt to the ground. Houses which belongs to Aste. Yohannes IV., Ras Alula, Ras Seyoum and Enda Raesi are among those completely destroyed. These houses were also heritages of the monastery. 150 houses were built by Aste. Yohannes IV. to be used as a shelter for monks.

One monk aged 67 was killed by the artillery while praying inside his house and his body parts was dispersed all over the area and even it was very difficult to collect the body parts for burial.

Then after the shelling, on the next day (January 12, 2021), Eritrean soldiers approached to the monastery and said they want to climb and inspect the monastery. They fired three bullets to the sky to scare us (the monks) and make their request accepted as the thick leather rope used to climb was already pulled up by the monks.

Then the monks went down and when we ask the Eritrean soldiers why are you doing this? Why do you want to destroy the monastery? how comes you bomb a monastery? This monastery was not bombed and shelled during the times of Yodit Gudit, Ahmad Gragn and even the Dergue regime had many tanks and bombs but this monastery was never touched; then the Eritrean soldiers said we were informed that Debrestion and his soldiers are hiding in the monastery and that is why we were shelling the monastery for the whole day.

Later we told them the information they got is incorrect and then they asked the us (monks) to handover if there are arms and properties of militias kept inside the monastery and they left.

The Eritrean soldiers came back on January 14, 2021, and asked to climb up to the monastery and search everything in the monastery. 6 Eritrean soldiers climbed to the monastery with the support of the monks and searched all houses of the monks. The church was the only place not searched. After all the inspection, when they knew nothing was inside, the soldiers were very sad and regretted for shelling the monastery and said we should have not bombed it.

After that when we ask them why are you doing (in reference to the shelling) this to us (the monks), they said you are lucky you lost only one monk but our 8 (7 Christian and 1 Muslim) soldiers were killed by snake. This information was obtained from the soldiers themselves.

The soldiers did not loot (even a needle) from the Monastery. However, from the surrounding community, around 30 Eritreans soldiers came with a car and looted grains, television, generator and other goods of farmers. Later the car overturned while travelling to a place called Gidera and 28 of them died and only 2 survived. Still Eritrean soldiers are present in various areas surrounding the monastery and looting of goods and properties of farmers is almost everywhere.

We have collected the remains of the heavy artillery which landed at the Monastery into one place. Right now, there is great anger and sadness in the Monastery as this was happened after more than 1600 years since its establishment. All monks of the monastery are now in great danger and in need of assistance as their food, goods, cloths and shelter is completely destroyed and burned to the ground. Previously, we were making living

from a small amount of assistance and contribution we get by people of the surrounding community but now even the people have lost everything because of the looting and we (all the monks) are in great danger.

The monastery has faced great destruction and the houses destroyed were also heritages of the monastery and this need to be disclosed to the international community. The Monks (we) are currently living in danger, uncertainty and fear; we are also very scared when we hear gunshots and we don't know when this conflict might end and even the monastery might be bombed again, there is no guarantee.

Currently, the Eritreans soldier are present at the foot of the monastery as well as in the surroundings areas such as Kisd Edaga (road intersection which goes to Adwa). Sometimes they came to the foot of the monastery but never climbed again.

We want our peace to be restored; we want our people to get peace; our people are being killed without any crime and we call on the international community to support us for the conflict to be stopped.

Finally, we pray to God, peace to be restored to our people as there are no winners but losers from a war.